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Preparing for the First Day of Kindergarten

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The transition from an early childhood program to kindergarten can be a wonderfully exciting time for children as well as parents, but it can also seem quite daunting. The change from a small, cozy environment to the larger world of an on-going school can unsettle even the most confident 5-year-old. Predictable expectations and comfortable routines make way for the unknown. New friends and teachers can bring a sense of apprehension to every incoming family. With this in mind, there are a number of useful strategies that can ease the uncertainty of walking through the door of a brand new school in September.

Reacquaint Yourself with the School

Many kindergarten programs have a spring gathering to welcome those who will be new to the school. The chance to revisit, after the admissions process is over, is an important first step in acclimating to your new environment. Many schools provide incoming parents with a connection to a particular family who is currently part of the community. This buddy system can be a tremendous resource for answers to questions that may come up during the summer or even throughout the first year. If your school does not offer a spring event, ask if you and your child may stop by the school to take a peek at the classrooms, to refresh your memories. If you are not matched with a buddy, ask if there is a parent you can contact during the summer months. On-going schools are all too happy to help families with these very reasonable requests.

Get to Know Your Child's Classmates

Summer playdates with new classmates are a wonderful way to pave the road to a successful opening day of school. Connecting with a few new friends can make a big difference in establishing a sense of comfort in a new classroom. When class lists are distributed, families can take advantage

of opportunities to get together with new classmates. One parent of a currently enrolled kindergartener told me that her goal was to have a playdate with each child in her son's class before the December holiday. It was no wonder that her son was so socially engaged and happy at school. While a playdate with every member of the class might not be possible, it is a good idea to branch out and invest time in getting to know as many new friends as possible.

Explore the School's Information

Most schools have state-of-the-art websites that are full of valuable information. Spend time and explore the website alone and also with your child. You will find everything from the curriculum to the faculty list to the dress code on the website, and your child will enjoy the photos of children and teachers involved in engaging activities. You will also find helpful links to upcoming events and the school calendar. Make sure to take time and transcribe the dates of special school functions onto your personal calendar. The more information you have at your fingertips, the better prepared you will be for the fall.

Summer Reading and Other Stimulation

Some schools distribute a summer reading list of picture books, early readers and chapter books, listed by grade level. The list can usually be found on school websites as well. Children are not expected to be reading as they

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enter kindergarten, but exposure to well chosen books on the list can set the stage for the language arts program your child will soon be experiencing. Most families have already spent many hours with their children reading books; using a school's reading list is simply a guide to making particularly curriculum-friendly selections. Number games are also a very

good way to keep your child stimulated over the summer. Board and card games help with number sense, memory skills and focus, and offer enjoyable ways for families to spend time together. Puzzles are great choices for

the summer, too. No matter what activity you choose, make sure it is child-centered, casual and stress-free.

Plan Your Travel

It is important to arrive at school on time, and morning travel to a new destination will be a big change for you and your child. If your kindergarten program is in an unfamiliar neighborhood, it is a good idea to practice your route to school. A few trips on public transportation will help you get your bearings so you can be sure to arrive on time. If the school is in your neighborhood, you also need to think about timing. City parents can be very dependent on strollers for getting from one place to the next. Strollers are efficient and help to speed up travel time. While they work nicely at the early childhood age, kindergarteners are ready for the next step in their independence by leaving the stroller behind. This might add some extra time to your travels, so you will need to factor this into your morning schedule. Finally, if you are relying

on a yellow bus for the commute, it may be the first time your child has actually traveled to school without you. You might want to meet the bus when it arrives at school, just for a day or so. No matter how your child will be getting

to school, keep in mind that it is very difficult on children when they are late for class. It is not always easy to jump into the action, particularly in a new setting. Children need some transitional time in their classrooms before the day begins, and they are much more settled and ready to start if they arrive on time.

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Prepare for Separation

How does your new school handle separation? Ask about the process before the first day of class. Even if your child has easily separated before, drop-offs in a new environment can be a bit bumpy at first. Trust the kindergarten teachers and the experience they have, and then “kiss and go.” Long, passionate good-byes are never helpful for any child. Be clear with your child about the details for pick-up. The secure feeling of knowing who will be there when school ends is enormously helpful in setting the stage for

a comfortable day. The teachers will let you know if your child needs more support from you, but chances are very good that your child will go with the flow of activity the moment you are out the door.

Getting Dressed

If your new school requires a uniform, it is a good idea to order it early, try it on and get into the swing of dressing in the morning. These rehearsals

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will prepare you for leaving home when you need to. If your new school does not require a uniform, it is still important to think about clothing. Too many options can

create confusion in the morning, so planning ahead can save some valuable time. Make sure you are aware of the dress code before hitting the back-to-school sales. Avoid buying those sparkly pink sneakers or hooded sweatshirts until you are quite sure what is acceptable. You might like to plan a special shopping trip to choose the perfect backpack. There is nothing more exciting to a child than the feeling of independence in wearing a backpack to kindergarten, just like the big kids.

Adapting to a Longer Day

Kindergarten days are often longer days than those experienced in an early childhood program. The extra hours, along with the newness of the environment, can be quite tiring to children at first. If possible, plan summer experiences that expand on your child's hours of organized activity. Camp programs, for example, can help a child build stamina for a busier day. Most on-going schools offer a large array of afterschool activities that can be quite enticing; it is best not to sign up for too many classes at the start. See how your child is adjusting to the more demanding school day before committing to that chess class, ballet school or soccer team. There will be plenty of time to fill your child's days with afterschool activities; it might not be necessary to do so in September. Of course, if childcare is needed after school, take advantage of what your on-going school offers. Spending extended hours in the familiar setting of school can be comforting to a child. It is best to avoid traveling from one location to the next just to the fill hours before parents or caregivers are available.

Food Issues

Lunchtime in a new environment can be quite unsettling for students so keep that in mind when you are talking with your child about the new school. If lunch is brought from home, the big question is, “Who will I eat with?” The social aspects of lunch can be tricky. Make sure you know the routine that is followed at school so you can prepare your child in advance. If lunch is served in a cafeteria, picky eaters might find the experience to be a bit stressful at first. Be sure you are clear about the way lunch is served and find out as much as possible about the school’s typical menus. Try new foods at home and give your child the experience of eating items that will be served during the school day. Let the teachers know of food preferences in advance so they can be helpful to your child when lunch is served. Some children will be uncomfortable eating food that is not from home and will need time to ease into this new experience. And, of course, it is always important to let the teachers and school nurse know of food allergies. All schools have become increasingly aware of nut allergies, but you should never assume that the school is actually nut-free. Check on the policy. No matter what your child’s eating habits are, it is a good idea to arrive at pick-up time with a snack should your child, like most children, be ravenous after a long school day.

Trust Your New School

While these steps can be helpful in preparing for the transition to kindergarten, it is important to keep in mind that everyone in your new school is excited to welcome you in September. The teachers and administrators are eager to help you with this transition, and they are there to answer any of your questions, big or small. Have trust in the school. If you are relaxed and open to the changes ahead, your child will be relaxed and open as well.

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